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AUTHOR(S):

Zawawi Ibrahim

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Mediating Identities in a Changing Malaysia: An Introduction

ZAWAWI IBRAHIM*

As a nation state moves through its post-colonial era to meet both the internal and global challenges of nation-building, development and all the attendant processes of modernisation and transformation that come with it, have become the order of the day. But what is often forgotten is that these are also processes of contestation involving the state, institutions, various social groupings and classes of social actors in which identities are continuously being constructed, renegotiated and reconstructed. Hence mediating identities should be recognized as a crucial process in the whole phenomenon of the emergence, consolidation and sustainability of the modern nation state.

Malaysia in this context is no different. Since its independence in 1957 to the May 13, 1969 tragedy, right through the NEP (New Economic Policy) period from the 70s until the current phase of the post-NEP era, which sees itself preparing to embrace the Mahathir-inspired Vision of 2020, its preoccupation with "development" has always been its political mainstay. One must not also forget the fact that the "plural society" legacy of Malaysian society left by British colonialism, in particular the economic imbalance between the Malays (or *bumiputera*) and the non-Malay components of the populace (especially the Chinese) has also been a critical factor in driving home the urgency of redressing the problems of the economy. Mediated through the rationale of a Malay-dominated polity, the economic basis of the Malaysian post-colonial nationalism was transparent from the very start. But now in the era of the post-NEP, marked by a more growth-oriented National Development Policy (NDP) and a commitment towards achieving a newly industrialised country status, the focus of the nation state seems to also shift from economism to a concern with identity of a wider conception of a Malaysian nationhood (*Bangsa Malaysia*).

At the empirical level, it is apparent that new changes are occurring at both the levels of contestation and meanings in the discourse on identity, as it relates to groups or social classes, mediated by the forces of the state, capital and global factors. It is therefore crucial that questions of identity or identities are problematised in the context of the changing nation state.

At the level of theory and perspective, it is equally pertinent that existing analyses of identity or identities also move away from the conventional "plural society" or "race relations" approaches. It is essential to incorporate in the analyses reference to the changing dynamics of the Malaysian political economy but yet without being caught in the trappings of the

* Faculty of Economics & Administration, Universiti Malaya, Lembah Pantai, 59100 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia (Visiting Research Scholar, Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Kyoto University, from August 1995 to April 1996)

“modernisation” or “dependency” approaches, or in a neo-Marxism which cannot adequately grapple with the question of identity or other superstructural themes. Indeed, given a duration of theoretical impasse and stock-taking among various disciplines and fields of inquiry in the last decade or so, and what with the current promises from the field of “cultural studies” or the decentering tendencies in postmodernist theory, the discourse on identity may yet see a thousand flowers bloom!

It is with this optimism that we address the question of “Mediating Identities” in this volume. The concerns are both theoretical and empirical. Yet of course in a volume such as this, which originally began with a set of different terms of reference, it is also humbled by its own limitations. Firstly, it is impossible to do justice to the empirical totality of the Malaysian situation. Hence we apologise for the inadequate discussion on the East Malaysian subjects in the volume. Secondly, at another level of representation, themes of labour and gender have not also been given their due focus. We regret this exclusion and realise that no discourse on identity is complete without them. Therefore, it is in the spirit of both the above “incompleteness” and optimism that we present this volume as an exploratory investigation into the theme of “Mediating Identities” in the changing Malaysian landscape.

The volume opens up with a provocative and deconstructionist piece by Shamsul A.B., titled: “Debating about Identity in Malaysia: A Discourse Analysis,” who takes to task the taken-for-granted notions of “authority-defined” *bumiputera* — based conception of “nationhood” and the equally “authority-defined” construction of knowledge on Malaysia based on what he refers to as “ethnicised knowledge.” By positing the construction of such “authority-defined” as a product of the historical contestation between two sets of realities — the “authority-defined” and the “everyday-defined” (“each with its own internal divisions”), he is able to demonstrate, by using the Malaysian experience, the “fractured vision” of such “knowledges.” Hence, rather than taking the Malay/*bumiputera* “authority-defined” notion of “national identity” or “nationhood” (*Bangsa Malaysia*) as given, he opts instead for a “middle” ground which takes into account the “everyday” dynamics of the “nation(s)-of-intent” articulations among the various *bumiputera* and non-*bumiputera* components of the Malaysian populace. By the same token and method, he is able to point to the “ethnicised knowledge” which has trapped a segment of “radical” scholarship and writings on Malaysian society as they continue to treat in their analyses, the *bumiputera* “authority-defined” notion of the state or nationhood as unproblematic. It is hoped that Shamsul’s overview and critical appraisal of the discourse will pave the way for constructive theoretical debates among Malaysianists in the future.

Heng Pek Koon’s article: “Chinese Responses to Malay Hegemony in Peninsular Malaysia 1957-96” follows logically as a second contribution in the volume. Already an established authority on Chinese politics in Malaysia, in her current piece, the author competently traces the dynamics of the contestation between the two dominant “ethnic” players in the evolution of Malaysian society from independence to the era of the post NEP, in particular, as has been expressed through the role of Chinese political parties, especially the MCA (Malaysian Chinese

Association). The author successfully weaves into her analysis the interconnections between Chinese political parties and Chinese capital, and the crucial role they both play in mediating Chinese identity and interest in the various phases of Malay economic nationalism. The author notes with some optimism the current gains by the Chinese, both cultural and economic, in the context of the present economic climate and the growth-oriented post-NEP, National Development Policy (NDP). At the level of identity, the above scenario has been complemented by the emerging conception of a Malaysian nation (*Bangsa Malaysia*) which is wider and more embracing.

Rahman Embong's "Social Transformation, the State and the Middle Classes in Post-Independence Malaysia" represents a long overdue analysis in exploring both the theoretical and empirical questions regarding the emergence of the middle classes in the current phase of the Malaysian economic transformation. Dismissing the argument that the present Malaysian transformation is "a return to a long-established path," the author also takes issue with those scholars who argue that the middle classes in Malaysia are engendered mainly by the processes of modern state formation. He asserts that the role of the state should not be overtly emphasised at the expense of the role of other factors such as production relations and cultural capital. The author thenceforth illustrates empirically how, together with the state sector, the private sector has been a major engine of growth, spurred on by the export-industrialisation policy of the state, to evolve capitalist relations of production not only vital for capital accumulation and production, but also in providing a large proportion of "middle class occupations" as employment opportunities. From an on-going research project on the middle classes, the author further demonstrates not only the heterogeneity of the Malay middle class as a group, but the data on their educational sponsorship and job aspirations, also indicate an emerging trend towards their decreasing dependence on the state or the government sector.

Maier's witty and thought-provoking "A Chew of Sugarcane — Ahmad Kotot's *Hikayat Percintaan Kasih Kemudaan*" is a unique contribution which celebrates "difference" as the mark of a genre that should have been given its rightful place as a "classic" in modern Malay literature. The author pays homage to Ahmad Kotot's spunky-spirited tale of young love, which was rendered in the unconventional blending of manuscript writing and tale-telling. Maier's tribute to the writer is set against the backdrop of the turmoil of Malay transition to a modern world. It was a period preoccupied by the search for "Malayness" among Malay writers, and their struggle to advance the Malay language through the Romanised Rumi, the vision of ASAS 50 and the setting up of *Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka* in an ambience which was dominated by "grim" and "serious" issues of Malay underdevelopment. In a sense, Maier's piece underscores the pathos of such identity-making; it laments the inability of modern Malay writers to "laugh" and to indulge in Ahmad Kotot's light-hearted humour and fun. Closer to home, and more recently, it reminds us of the aggressive corporate monsters we have created in our midst in the name of Malay development!

The final contribution by Zawawi Ibrahim, "The Making of a Subaltern Discourse in the Malaysian Nation-State: New Subjectivities and the Poetics of Orang Asli Dispossession and

Identity,” provides the empirical link of the “everyday-defined” reality alluded to in Shamsul’s opening article in the volume. Inspired by Foucault’s ideas, the author seeks to elucidate the contents of the new subjectivities among an indigenous minority — the Orang Asli of Peninsular Malaysia. By zeroing on various case studies of the “dispossession crisis” engendered by post-colonial developmentalism, the author listens to the “peoplespeak” voices “on the ground” and argues that these subjectivities represent a subaltern discourse in the making, contesting the current dominant discourse (or “regimes of truth”) on Orang Asli which has been propagated by the state and officialdom. In the final analysis, as the author concludes, the above discourse will not only articulate its own “cultural content” but also transmit its own “power relations of resistance.”